

Swashbucklers with Class

By Skip Williams



Just about everyone is familiar with the classic swashbuckler -- a flashy combatant who lives by her wits and literally dives into combat. But a swashbuckler can be much more than just a character who looks good in a fight. She might be a tireless do-gooder, a fun-loving reveler, a wisecracking vagabond, a rebel, a pugnacious adventurer who won't sit still when insulted, or some combination of these.

The Pros and Cons of a Swashbuckler

The swashbuckler's combat abilities make her a force to be reckoned with in battle, but the style with which she performs them makes her a truly memorable foe.

Swashbuckler Assets

The swashbuckler class offers a solid base of fighting ability, plus plenty of room for customization. Swashbucklers can be fighting acrobats, professionals who lead double lives, glib negotiators, smugglers, pirates, or just about any characters who favor wit and style over brute force. Below are several assets you have going for you when you play a swashbuckler.

- **High Hit Points:** The swashbuckler's 10-sided Hit Dice ensure that she can absorb plenty of damage and still stay in the fight.
- **Good Attack Bonus:** A swashbuckler's base attack bonus is +1 per swashbuckler level, which is the best in the game. Thus, she can expect to hit what she attacks.
- **Good Initiative Bonus:** The swashbuckler needs a high Dexterity because agility is her primary defense. But a high Dexterity score also gives her a high initiative bonus. As a result, swashbucklers are seldom caught unawares and can usually choose when to act in a fight.
- **Moderate Skill Points:** The swashbuckler's four skill points per level give her better skills than most other characters receive. And since the swashbuckler typically has a decent Intelligence score as well (to take advantage of her insightful strike class feature; see below), she probably has enough skill points to choose a broad array of skills.
- **Good Fortitude Saves:** A swashbuckler uses the best save progression in the game for Fortitude saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). This natural hardiness helps her resist most effects that attack her body, such as poison, polymorphing, and energy draining -- and that resistance comes in very handy for a character who fights often.



- **Fairly Good Reflex Saves:** A swashbuckler uses the worst progression in the game for Reflex saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). However, her high Dexterity score and her grace class feature help to improve her Reflex saves. This boost helps the swashbuckler avoid most effects that could deal damage or entrap her, such as area spells, entanglement, and many traps.
- **Fairly Good Mobility:** The swashbuckler has no class feature that improves her speed, but her light armor makes her faster than most fighting characters, and the right skill selection can help her move through and fight in areas that other characters may find inaccessible.
- **Many Class Features:** The swashbuckler begins play with Weapon Finesse as a bonus feat, so she can use her Dexterity bonus for melee attacks -- assuming that she has the correct weaponry. In addition, she gains a number of other class features as she attains higher levels.

At 2nd level, she gains the grace class feature, which gives her a +1 competence bonus on Reflex saves. This bonus increases to +2 at 11th level and to +3 at 20th level.

The insightful strike class feature that the swashbuckler gains at 3rd level lets her add her Intelligence bonus (if any) to attack rolls made using her Weapon Finesse feat.

At 5th level, the swashbuckler gains a +1 dodge bonus against any single foe in melee combat. This bonus stacks with the bonus from the Dodge feat (if she has it), and increases by +1 every five swashbuckler levels after 5th.

At 7th level, the swashbuckler gains the acrobatic charge class feature, which allows her to charge even when terrain features or creatures block a straight line to her opponent. The ability doesn't allow the swashbuckler to charge through impassible obstacles (such as walls), but it does let her use the Jump or Tumble skill to weave her way through rough terrain and complete her charge. The DM sets the DC for any checks that might be necessary to finish the charge.

The improved flanking class feature that a swashbuckler gains at 8th level gives her a +4 bonus on attack rolls instead of the usual +2 whenever she flanks a foe.

At 11th level, the swashbuckler gains the lucky class feature, which lets her reroll one failed attack roll, skill check, ability check, or saving throw each day.

The acrobatic mastery class feature that the swashbuckler gains at 13th level allows her to take 10 on any Jump or Tumble check she makes.

At 14th level, the swashbuckler gains the weakening critical class feature, which lets her deal Strength damage to her foe with a confirmed critical hit.

At 17th level, a swashbuckler gains the slippery mind class feature. If she fails a saving throw against an enchantment, she can make a new saving throw 1 round later to throw off the effect.

Finally, the wounding critical class feature that the swashbuckler gains at 19th level lets her deal Constitution damage to her foe with a confirmed critical hit. This effect is in addition to the Strength damage she deals via the weakening critical class feature.

Swashbuckler Weaknesses

As with any other character, the swashbuckler's advantages come at a price. Here are a few of the disadvantages you should keep in mind if you're considering a character of this class.

- **Poor Will Saving Throws:** Swashbucklers have the worst progression for Will saves in the game (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). Because of this drawback, they aren't so great at shrugging off effects that attack their minds -- though the lucky and slippery mind class features offset this weakness to some degree.
- **Fairly Low Armor Class:** The fact that a swashbuckler has proficiency with only light armor, and none at all with shields, leaves her with only a mediocre Armor Class. Her high Dexterity score and level-based dodge bonuses can provide an impressive boost to her Armor Class, but neither applies all the time. Her Dexterity bonus doesn't apply to her AC when she's immobile, flat-footed, or unable to see her foe, and her dodge bonus applies only to melee attacks from a single designated foe, leaving her vulnerable to ranged attacks and to attacks from multiple foes.
- **Fairly Limited Skill Selection:** A swashbuckler has a wider array of class skills than other characters do, but many of them -- such as Balance, Jump, and Tumble -- focus on her flashy approach to combat. Still, she does have a few skills that aid her interactions with other characters. Among these are Bluff, which is good for some fast-talking when the need arises, and Diplomacy, which she can use when charm proves more appropriate than swordplay. The swashbuckler has only one perception skill -- Sense Motive, which is useful for seeing through other characters' smooth talk. She also has access to all the Craft and Profession skills, which can be useful for making a little cash on the side or for establishing a cover during her more daring exploits. The Escape Artist skill can literally get her out of a tight spot, and Climb, Swim, and Use Rope can provide her with a little extra mobility and security when the need arises.

Playing a Classy Swashbuckler

Great swashbucklers usually use the following techniques. So if you're playing one of these characters, try to build your strategy around these concepts.

Put It out There

No one likes a timid swashbuckler -- all the great ones display at least a little swagger and bravado. So don't sit still for insults, real or imagined.

When working with a party, take the lead and press the attack when trouble arises, placing yourself between the enemy and more vulnerable party members. And even when you're at rest, stay alert for heroic opportunities.

Keep in mind that any dolt can charge straight into a fight. Look for ways to gain the advantage through position or an unexpected maneuver. You don't have to swing from every chandelier, but always look for ways to use your mobility and acrobatic skills to keep your foes off balance.

Look Before You Leap

You live to be bold, but beware of starting a fight that you can't handle. Take a moment to assess the situations you face and limit yourself to responses that you can use successfully -- or those that at least allow you to escape if the situation goes sour. Always weigh your risks and avoid taking chances that could produce unpredictable results.

Always Have a Plan -- and a Backup Plan

Your specialty is using finesse and skill to outsmart and defeat your foes, but you can be bold without rushing

blindly into every combat. So take a moment to assess the battlefield for features you can use to your advantage. For example, you might be able to leap onto a ledge or tabletop to gain a height advantage.

But keep in mind that fighting from an unsteady position can leave you vulnerable to unexpected maneuvers on the part of the enemy. For example, a foe might ruin your day by dumping over the table you've leaped on. You can protect yourself from such maneuvers by continually fighting on the move. In any case, be prepared to try another option if your original tactics don't work out, and don't rule out retreat when you face more danger than you can handle.

Remember Your Friends

Don't forget the rest of your party. You're at your best fighting a single foe in melee combat, and the most reliable way to arrange that situation when facing multiple foes is to pick out a single opponent and let your allies deal rest. Try to avoid situations that force you to enter combat alone. And when approaching a battle, consider which other characters make your best allies.

The Party's Stealth Person: A rogue or monk makes an excellent adventuring partner for you. The stealth and perception abilities of such characters come in very handy for getting advance information about the dangers you face. Furthermore, your improved flanking ability and the rogue's sneak attack ability make for a deadly combination.

Always be prepared to hold up your end of such a partnership. Your light armor and fairly quick movement put you in the best position to provide a rescue when a stealthy character's reconnaissance efforts go bad. Besides, a daring rescue done with a flourish makes you look great.

The Party's Arcane Spellcaster: This character is weaker and more vulnerable than you are when it comes to physical combat, so be prepared to rush to his aid when trouble arises. If the party's arcane spellcaster faces an unexpected threat, you might be the only character who can get free to deal with the situation. Just look at it as another chance for you to save the day with a brilliant maneuver.

The Party's Divine Spellcaster: Get friendly and stay friendly with your party's cleric, druid, or paladin. This character's healing spells can stave off death, especially if you manage to get poisoned or suffer some other debilitating attack. Most divine spellcasters also have decent fighting skills, so they're invaluable for watching your back when you take the fight to the enemy. A divine spellcaster most likely cannot move as quickly as you can, though, so try not to leave this key ally too far behind.

Some Key Equipment

The right gear can help you quite a bit in your flamboyant career. Below are some essential pieces to pack.

- **Armor and Shield:** Many of your class features cease functioning if you wear medium or heavy armor, so stick with light armor, but get the best you can afford. At the beginning of your career, studded leather may be the best choice available to you, but move up to a chain shirt or mithral armor as soon as you can.

You don't have any shield proficiency, but a masterwork or magic buckler can give your Armor Class a boost without cramping your style. You can use a heavier shield if you like, but even if you spend a feat slot to become proficient with it, the shield's armor check penalty will interfere with your Weapon Finesse feat, so it's best to stick with a buckler.

Though heavy armor isn't your style, you still need all the Armor Class you can get. So add other defensive items, such as *rings of protection* and *amulets of natural armor*, whenever you can afford them. Keep in mind that several lesser items whose bonuses stack give you better protection, and at a cheaper price, than one big item does.

- **Primary Melee Weapon:** Your Weapon Finesse feat makes a light and handy weapon essential. Though you're proficient with all simple and martial weapons, stick with those allowed by the Weapon Finesse feat. Both a short sword and a rapier are fairly effective weapons, and both work with Weapon Finesse, but the rapier's broad threat range makes your weakening critical and wounding critical class features that much more deadly. A spiked chain also works with Weapon Finesse and is useful for tripping and disarming foes - two combat tricks that go well with your flamboyant fighting style. The spiked chain is a two-handed exotic weapon, so you must spend a feat slot and give up your buckler to use it, but it could prove well worth these costs.
- **Backup Melee Weapon:** Always have a light weapon or two handy. A light slashing weapon, such as a dagger or hand axe, can help get you out of a tight spot (for example, being swallowed whole by a big monster).

It also pays to have a hefty weapon on hand in case you lose your primary one or find that it isn't effective. Make sure this weapon deals a different kind of damage than your primary weapon does. For example, if you normally use a rapier (a piercing weapon), consider a mace (a bludgeoning weapon) as a backup. If you're not using a buckler or a spiked chain, you might even want to consider taking the Two-Weapon Fighting feat so that you can fight with two weapons at once. A pair of light weapons such as short swords will work best for you, especially if they're weapons for which you've chosen the Weapon Focus feat. A rapier in your primary hand and a light weapon in your off hand is also a combination worth considering.

- **Ranged Weapon:** Your high Dexterity score makes you a deadly ranged combatant, even if fighting at a distance doesn't thrill you. A shortbow or composite shortbow offers good range and a decent rate of fire, and it won't weigh you down too much. A light weapon that you can throw is another good choice, especially for those times when your target is just out of melee reach.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies, and he served as the sage of *Dragon Magazine* for eighteen years. Skip is a codesigner of the **D&D** 3rd edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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